



Double-page spread from the series: **From the Periphery**  
Bettina Lockemann, Braunschweig/Germany 2013

# **from the periphery. a photographic approach to the city of braunschweig, germany**

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*The paper introduces a photographic approach to the topics of housing projects and automobile-friendliness as perceived in an average German city. The photographic series From the Periphery explores not only multiple layers of peripherization within the urban fabric but also the onlookers' perspective that differs according to the chosen mode of transportation. Interweaving the underlying photographic concept of artistic documentary –chosen to provide the viewers a specific visuality of urban constellations– with the urban condition and photography theory the paper explores the visual access to specific urban aspects. Taking preliminary decision-making and work on location into account, the paper provides a profound insight into a photographer's mode of operation within the urban sphere.*

**keywords** Photography, Research led art, Documentary, Photographic method, Urban space

## introduction

The city of Braunschweig –a city in Northern Germany with a population of roughly 250,000– is a regional center with a history that began in medieval times. The city is proud to be the birthplace of Henry the Lion, an important European ruler in the 12<sup>th</sup> century whose castle is located in the city center and who is buried in the crypt of the local Cathedral. My photographic approach to Braunschweig (Brunswick) leaves the city's long history aside and engages with urban issues rooted in developments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Two major aspects that shape the city's appearance today are the housing developments, in particular those of the 1930s, and the conversion of the city to become car friendly after World War II. Both aspects are very distinct in Braunschweig, however, I consider Braunschweig as an example for a specific way of urban development that can be found in numerous German cities.

I photographed *From the Periphery* in Braunschweig in 2012<sup>1</sup>. The title featuring the term *periphery* not only stands for the urban outskirts or the peripheral ring roads circling the city's center but also for the perspective of the cyclist or pedestrian who is usually situated at the side of the street as the street's center is reserved for motorists. Therefore I am not only referring to the periphery in the urban situation as such but also to the view on the city from the side of the street as well as from its outer areas. Thus it is not only the urban situation that I take into account but also the perspective from which it is viewed.



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## artistic approach

I call my artistic approach to the world *artistic documentary*. I am photographing the world as I find it without staging anything –I do not add or take away anything. However, I am well aware of the fact that the mere presence of a photographer with a camera on a scene may alter the situation. I think of artistic documentary photography as a form of realistic art or *realism*, a “dialectic art [...] which provokes a common experience of reality. [...] Only when the artwork, its environment and its observers share such a relationship, which, by nature of its artistic form allow this environment to be understood anew, are we dealing with realism. The pure reflection is just as unrealistic as formal abstraction”<sup>2</sup>.

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When planning a new photographic project I make a decision for a specific city linked to a topic that characterizes the tangible urban situation of this particular place. My photographs will not so much *represent* the chosen city in its general complexity. They will address the topic and its context within *this* city but they may also allow to view the issue in a more general way, to address the particular phenomenon as it can be found in numerous other cities as well.

The viewers of my work –which is conceived in large series– are meant to gain access to a particular topic that is dealt with in a subjective, research led approach. Within the photographic series I intend to create an opportunity for the viewers to experience a very specific and focused view on particular urban situations and an atmosphere they may or may not be familiar with. My photographs are to be experienced by the viewers who come up against my perspective and who will need to deal with the pictorial portrayal of situations shown. As my pictures are not intended to serve as information it will be difficult to read them in that way. A *reading* of the photographs is also not backed as I refrain from using captions. Captions are usually used to explain the situation shown which supports the use of the photograph as sign in a semiotic way. I rather see my pictures in a phenomenological way as objects holding specific visual qualities that first and foremost need to be perceived visually<sup>3</sup>.

Each project begins with an idea that is further developed through profound research. Before I start to photograph I want to have an in depth understanding of the issues I am dealing with: history, main players, political constellations, and so forth. With this background I start to think about the visibility of my future pictures as to develop an idea of how to get across my ideas about the topic. Which means that I am always entering the urban space with a specific focus in mind; I am not just observing, waiting to see how things evolve. As photographs can never be neutral, and as they are unable to just communicate 'how things are' I find it necessary to have an idea about not only *what* is going to be pictured, but also *how* this will be done. Therefore, in the period of research, I have to develop my own stance toward the topic in order to find out *how* I want to depict it.

I focus on particular urban aspects in order to emphasize them. I render them visible and thus accessible for the viewers. In my approach I concentrate not solely on the architectural structures but on the interrelation and context of the plural players within the urban context such as: houses, streets, sidewalks, greenery, street furniture, fences, garbage cans, traffic signs, cars –parked or moving–, pedestrians, to name but a few. Observing the entire situation helps me to perceive the urban space in its complexity, which facilitates the mediation of atmosphere in the photographic series. It is the spatial structure that plays an important part in the conception of my photographs, which needs to be experienced by moving through the city.

This approach bears resemblance to the theory of "performative urbanism" that Sophie Wolfrum develops: "Performative urbanism seeks to evaluate the architecture of the city far beyond its physical or pictorial qualities. Paramount in this understanding of architecture and city is the *process of spatial experience*, the event structure of spatial relationships, and the openness of spatial structures"<sup>4</sup>. Performatively accessing the city is an important part of my artistic approach as it helps to gain multiple perspectives on urban situations thus allowing a perception of spaces as shifting, not locked into position.

The latter is important also from a theoretical standpoint: I consider documentary photographs to offer just one perspective out of the multitude of possible angles and viewpoints. The individual picture is limited in the detail it cuts out of reality. It is always *my* decision to choose a particular angle and framing I want to show the viewers. My selection depends on the context of my project, my intentions, and my stance. The photographs not only deal with what they render visible but they always include the invisibilities of what is left out of the frame. As the frame is set to deliberately cut the scene, the viewers will

understand that the world continues beyond the frame of the picture but that the picture gains importance in the way it is made. Accordingly, photographs always show a very specific viewpoint and not an all-encompassing view on *the* reality as such (which is impossible as a matter of principle). Based on my decisions and my experiences in the urban space my photographs make an offer to the audience to experience the situations shown with the help of my pictures' visuality.



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## **the photographic project preliminary work**

My interest in concentrating on the city of Braunschweig and its structures of housing projects and carfriendliness was triggered by my observations when I was teaching at the Braunschweig University of Art. On arrival in a city that I had not known before, I immediately noticed the broad streets that seemed to be overdimensioned for a city of that size. I also became interested in housing projects located in very central areas that featured their construction dates in the 1930s on their facades. This seemed to be unusual as, in Germany, such plaques are normally displayed proudly on houses built during reconstruction shortly after the war. To show construction dates that refer to the time of National Socialism in a proud way is rather scorned<sup>5</sup>.

I concentrated my research on the period between the 1930s when Braunschweig became a heavily industrialized city and a major scientific center hosting for example various institutions of aeronautical research and an air force command. Quite different to many other cities in the German Reich Braunschweig had full employment already by 1935, attracting workers and scientists as well as administrative personnel all of whom had to be housed. Braunschweig's city center consisted of cramped quarters in studwork houses many of which were more than 200 years old and the construction efforts expanding the area of the city in the Wilhelminian time until the 1920s had been disrupted by war, inflation, and the great depression leaving patchwork. Thus the never finished construction along central ring roads and further outside the city was restarted supplying different types of housing for workers, scientists, engineers, and administrators. Different from most construction in the

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1920s the new housing projects provided parking spaces either as blocks of garages, large parking areas, or individual garages attached to one-family houses. As the individual use of cars was on the rise this development paved the way for the postwar conversion of the city's street infrastructure to car compatibility. The latter was backed by Braunschweig's closeness to Wolfsburg, the headquarter of the Volkswagen production<sup>6</sup>.



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The city today seems closely related to the history of urban development and to ideas specified in CIAM's Charta of Athens (1933) which promoted the separation of the city's different functional areas like living, working, leisure, and movement<sup>7</sup>. Movement –as performed by automobile traffic– seems to be the predominant part in the urban fabric forming the way pedestrians, cyclists, and motorists perceive the city.

For my research I not only consulted books written on the topic but I also went to the city archive to view photographic material. I wanted to see what different urban areas looked like during the time of construction before the war, after the war, and during the period of reconstruction that lasted well into the 1970s. The Braunschweig city archive holds a lot of photographs from private estates, which enables a broad overview of different time periods and areas of the city.

I experienced the city usually as a cyclist or pedestrian or –from time to time– from a bus. I noticed broad streets that enclose the city's center in concentric circles as well as many of the housing projects. Before starting to work on the project my day-to-day paths were closely connected to the inner city and a specific area situated on the western periphery of the inner city mainly constructed in the 1930s. I cycled to areas further out or in other parts of Braunschweig only when I started to do research for the project.

Before starting to photograph several decisions have to be made: I decided to photograph in color to emphasize the contemporaneity of my work as I did not want to tie it to the 20<sup>th</sup> century and imagery thereof; to fragment the city and to interrupt the flow the broad streets are constructed to provide I chose a vertical image format (only when photographing from the driver's perspective I use a horizontal format); to have leafy greens and mostly sunny weather I chose to photograph in the summer. Once I have set the first locations to photograph according to my research I can begin to work on location.



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### on location

The places I chose to look at more closely are mainly housing projects constructed in the 1930s and 40s in central and peripheral areas, parking zones linked to those projects but also spread throughout the city, major thoroughfares in the city center as well as the periphery, and housing adjacent to highways. I am always interested in photographically exploring constellations of architecture, streets, cars, and everything else that can be found in the urban sphere. It is not the architecture per se that is central to my photographs but the context in which it can be discovered. While the photographs of the housing projects show mainly parked cars, in the street scenes on the one hand I work on the visualization of noise that is created by automobile traffic and on the other hand I focus on emptiness to point to the oversized infrastructure that is provided for automobile traffic. The alteration of compactness and vacantness provides an impression of the impact of the built infrastructure on the perception of the city.

The framing of the picture is always very important. The border of the photograph separates between that what is in the picture and that what is left out but can be encountered on the scene just as everything else. In *From the Periphery* I decided to deliberately frame the pictures in a way that the framing –the cut– can be experienced when looking at them; I do not take an object –for example an architectural structure– into the center of the picture and go along with it to use the natural end of the frame. I not only work with deliberate cuts through the scene, I also use the partial occlusion of structures by parked or moving cars. The former heightens the awareness of the fragmentation of space and emphasizes the –occasionally limited– perspective of the pedestrian at the side of the street, the latter adverts to the situation of a pedestrian whose movements are often blocked by traffic and cars obstructing the path.

In the center of the book there are six photographs in horizontal format photographed out of a moving car (**f5**). These pictures present a very different perspective. They are not as precisely framed as the vertical pictures and the architecture of the urban situation moves into sight only as a backdrop. Main protagonists in these photographs are the street and the other cars. These photographs are very important in the context of the project as they show the different perception of the city from a driver's perspective.



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By framing the pictures to show constellations and not individual objects I want to undermine the reading of the photographs as signs. My pictures are supposed to visualize and not to signify. They may be used as signs but I prefer them to be looked at in a phenomenological way to gain experiences by looking at them and to find out not only about the constellations shown but also about the atmosphere that is created in the picture. In this way my photographs become opaque as the viewers do not look *through* them –in the figurative sense– into the world they show but *at* them *as pictures*<sup>8</sup>. That is also the reason for the omission of captions. A caption usually states as text what is to see in the photograph or where it was taken. Thus the viewer can read what she is supposed to see. For the perception of my work it is more important to look at the pictures, to experience and discover than to gain an understanding of the information provided by picture and caption. Photographs in general create a new –purely pictorial– reality that differs from the world as it can be experienced; therefore it is important to understand the difference between photographs and world. This photo-theoretical background works in favor of the project's content<sup>9</sup>.

In the pictures people usually only appear shadowlike in their cars. The reason for the omission of people who only appear randomly in the distance is due to the fact that in the areas photographed I encountered only very few walkers or cyclists during the day. I did not leave them out intentionally but it seems that pedestrians and cyclists are present rather in the central shopping areas. Apart from that most people use their cars. This circumstance also points to the impact of urban design on social aspects of the city.





**f6\_Double-page spread from the series: From the Periphery**

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### post production

After photographing selection and sequencing of the pictures are major tasks. The process of image selection is especially challenging, not only as relates to the conceptual concerns of the project, but also in reflecting the possibilities of viewing and experiencing the images. Conceptual, design, and photo-theoretical aspects characterize this process. The sequencing is essential for the viewers' experience.

In the book the viewer is led into the city along broad thoroughfares (cover picture). Once in the city she is guided through various housing projects that make up virtual chapters (**f1**, **f3**, and **f7**). However, the chapters do not show just one area each, but a mix of housing projects connected by their distance to the city center. The chapters are always interrupted by photographs of broad streets and street crossings (**f2**). Towards the center of the book a section starts with a focus on streets and traffic (**f4**) followed by the horizontal pictures from the drivers' perspective (**f5**). Next there are more pictures of now rather empty streets (**f6**) followed by photographs of parking spaces. After this sequence dedicated to the automotive city the viewer is guided into housing projects that are situated further off the urban center featuring one-family and smaller apartment houses (**f7**). The book ends with pictures of main thoroughfares leading out of the city towards the highway. The sequencing imitates a wavelike movement through the urban space, playing with singularity and repetition, with a succession of broad, noisy and small, quiet streets. The only text inserted in the book is the title that is introduced only after an introductory sequence of six photographs and an artist statement after the photographic plates. The book includes 106 photographs altogether, most of them are shown in pairs on double-page spreads. Sometimes blank pages are inserted to shape the structure and guide the flow of leafing through the pages.

Apart from the order throughout the entire book, the sequencing is done in relation to the question of how photographs can be combined on the exhibition wall or on the double-page spread. I decided to group images thematically and to think in terms of pairs, sometimes also as (fake) panoramas, to more starkly emphasize the frame.

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## **conclusion**

My photographic approach to urban topics counts on ideas of documentary photography but expands them in a way to allow the viewers to experience the topic and the specific atmosphere created through the way the photographs are framed, selected, and presented. The photographic series addresses the spectators to actively engage with what is visualized in the pictures and to make up their minds of how to handle –and think about– the constellations shown. The audience is welcome to bring in their own experience with urban situations to broaden their understanding of the topic and of the pictures thus becoming active perceivers of the photographic work.

## endnotes

1. Bettina Lockemann, *Vom Rand aus/From the Periphery* (Salzburg: Fotohof edition, 2013). See also: Bettina Lockemann, "From the Periphery", accessed July 28, 2016, <http://archivalien.de/en/stadt/rand/rand.html>.
2. Bernd Stegemann, *Lob des Realismus*, this quote trans. Jon Shelton (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2015), 11–12.
3. I am referring to the basic question of whether images are essentially signs (in the semiotic sense), or if they are not instead perceivable objects that can also be used as signs (in a phenomenological sense). Lambert Wiesing, *Artifizielle Präsenz. Studien zur Philosophie des Bildes* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2005).
4. Sophie Wolfrum, "Performativer Urbanismus", this quote trans. Jon Shelton, accessed July 27, 2016, [https://www.stb.ar.tum.de/fileadmin/w00blf/www/DOWNLOADS/PublikationenTexte/Performativer\\_Urbanismus.pdf](https://www.stb.ar.tum.de/fileadmin/w00blf/www/DOWNLOADS/PublikationenTexte/Performativer_Urbanismus.pdf), 4. Italics: BL.
5. I assume that the plaques were reattached after renovation for reasons of protection of historic monuments.
6. Volkswagen was founded in 1937 as a company to build an affordable 'people's car', its location was decided upon by members of the government. The city of Wolfsburg did not exist before, it was built with the VW production plant about 30 km north-east of Braunschweig. The pre-production plant was set up in Braunschweig. Cf. Ulrike Gutzmann and Markus Lupa, *Vom „Vorwerk“ zum FahrWerk*, Volkswagen AG, Manfred Grieger, Ulrike Gutzmann, Dirk Schlinkert (eds.) (Wolfsburg: Volkswagen AG, 2008).
7. Le Corbusier, *Grundfragen des Städtebaus* (Stuttgart: Verlag Gerhard Hatje, n.d.).
8. Jean Paul Sartre explains the semiotic way of perceiving by talking about the language of flowers: "But if, after the agreement, white roses signify 'fidelity' to me, the fact is that I have stopped seeing them as roses. My attention cuts through them to aim beyond them at this abstract virtue. I forget them. I no longer pay attention to their mossy abundance, to their sweet stagnant odor. I have not even perceived them". Jean Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), 8.
9. Bettina Lockemann, "Photographic Activity from the Perspective of Photographic Practice", in *Fotografisches Handeln* ed. Ilka Becker, Bettina Lockemann et al. (in print) (Marburg: Jonas, 2016), 38–57.

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### CV

**Bettina Lockemann.** Is an artist and theoretician in the field of photography. Her main research interests are: artistic documentary photography, urbanism, photography theory, phenomenology, visual studies, contemporary art. From 2010 to 2015 she was Professor of photography (practice and theory) at Braunschweig University of Art in Germany. She studied fine art photography and media art at the Academy of Fine Arts Leipzig and completed her PhD in art history at Stuttgart State Academy of Art and Design. She has exhibited nationally and internationally; major solo exhibitions were *From the Periphery* (gallery of Braunschweig University of Art, 2013) and *Contact Zones* (Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart 2010). She has published numerous essays on photo books and documentary photography. Her major publications include *État d'Urgence* (forthcoming, Leipzig: spector, 2016), *From the Periphery* (Salzburg: Fotohof edition, 2013), *Contact Zones* (Ostfildern: Hatje-Cantz, 2011), and *Das Fremde sehen* (dissertation thesis, Bielefeld: transcript, 2008).